

UC research examines NATO and its 'smart defense' focus in era of economic uncertainty

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UC's Ivan Ivanov in Pristina, Kosovo, in front of a monument to unity. The Kosovars painted the monument in the colors of the flags of NATO nations in gratitude for NATO's 1999 intervention there. Credit: Ivan Ivanov

After the 2008 global economic meltdown, many nations reduced military budgets and pooled resources in response to economic uncertainties.

For example, at one time, Bulgaria and neighboring Romania each had their own very small submarine fleets. Then, as wear and tear necessitated taking equipment out of service, the countries had neither funds nor particular need to replace the old equipment. They instead opted to share vessels in order to meet training needs – while also saving money.

This is just one instance of security cooperation driven by today's shrinking defense budgets. But it exemplifies the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) long-term "smart defense" strategy which calls for such cooperation – along with prioritization and specialization – in the face of both tightening budgets and the reality that today's militaries typically join forces in "hot spot" responses related to peacekeeping and post-conflict reconstruction. That's according to University of Cincinnati researcher Ivan Dinev Ivanov, visiting assistant professor of political science in UC's McMicken College of Arts and Sciences.

Ivanov will present an overview of NATO's smart defense strategy at the American Political Science Association's annual conference August 29-Sept. 1. That examination, titled "The Effect of NATO Partnerships on the Alliance's Smart Defense," studies to what extent NATO has been successful in persuading its allies and partners to contribute to the alliance's smart defense focus.

Ivanov's overview analysis compares 27 different nations that participated in the NATO Partnership for Peace Program some time between 1994 and 2012. Some of these nations already were or have become NATO members, while others maintain partnership status. His research found that those with closer ties to the alliance are more likely conduct security policies in line with smart defense, including

- Reduction of unnecessary military personnel.
- Elimination of obsolete equipment.
- Increased participation in international operations.

"Thus, we see that NATO matters and matter perhaps more broadly two decades after it had to reinvent itself following the ebb of the Soviet threat. For the United States, NATO matters because its members and partners make up the bulk of the U.S. allies in flashpoints like Iraq and Afghanistan. The resources that we put in and share within NATO affect

how we manage things like a troop surge. And when the member nations of NATO move in tandem with the U.S., that gives difficult and often controversial military steps more credibility," explained Ivanov, who is also author of a 2011 book, "Transforming NATO: New Allies, Missions and Capabilities."

Given current unrest in countries like Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East or in sub-Saharan Africa, NATO's ability to engage its members and progress in various smart defense initiatives could matter even more in coming years.

Hot-spot assignments

NATO's broader security focus in the modern era contrasts with its 1949 founding, when it was dedicated to guaranteeing security for Europe against the risk of Soviet expansion and incursion. In fact, today, Russia has a special seat in the NATO-Russia Council.

For the most part, today's NATO members are not particularly concerned about territorial defense, in part because they are surrounded by like-minded friendly nations. Instead, they need to field specialized personnel and combat troops far from home in order to collectively meet the international community's needs for crisis response, stabilization and reconstruction.

"However," explained Ivanov, "Doing it alone in any sense is too expensive – in human lives, in money and material resources, and in credibility and in legitimacy, as evidenced in the last decade in Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite some recent economic difficulties, today's Europe has been able to integrate fairly well in terms the trade, commerce, economically and politically. However, it hasn't been able to do so militarily. That's where the importance of NATO and its focus on smart defense comes in."

Sharing resources in an uncertain global economy

The 28 NATO members range significantly in size from Luxembourg with its population of half a million people and the United States with a population of 313 million.

For many members, it is no longer economically realistic to maintain comprehensive national military forces. Instead, it makes sense for different nations to specialize and combine their efforts following a common strategy in order to deliver the "right" capabilities in multinational peacekeeping across the alliance. For example, certain nations have specializations in air lift and transportation; others in air surveillance; or still others in mountain combat.

"Smart defense is economically rational, especially in light of the fact that these nations rarely if ever have any concerns about an invasion across their borders from their neighbors. Instead, members' troops will now be sent to far-away Afghanistan or Iraq," stated Ivanov, adding that in his native Bulgaria for example, military forces in 1989 numbered about 110,000. They now number about 32,000.

Such trends will likely continue. Ivanov stated that after the most recent economic downturn that began in 2008, some NATO nations that once spent 2 percent of their budgets on defense cut them in half or by a quarter and are now spending 1 percent or 1.5 percent.

And NATO's push for smart defense could continue to facilitate transformation of armed forces as national politicians are often reluctant to take such steps on their own because of public resistance to downsizing a nation's military ranks. Political leaders can pin such measures on NATO's smart defense initiatives as "cover." In other words, political leaders make the needed reforms and adjustments and assign any local blame to NATO.

Possible NATO next steps

According to Ivanov, NATO could next employ its smart defense focus in the Middle East and North Africa to successfully mentor political and military leaders in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya to develop modern armed forces capable of fighting insurgency and terrorism, while contributing to broader regional security.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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